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DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

ALBANY, APRIL 16, 1865,

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THE SUNDAY MORNING IMMEDIATELY SUCCEEDING

THE ASSASSINATION

OF THE

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

BY

WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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DISCOURSE.

A day of darkness—[Joel II, 2.]

In uttering these words, originally prophetic of fearful judgments upon the people of Israel, I am sure I touch a chord that vibrates to the inmost soul of our common country. And in thus introducing my discourse I cannot but compare the present with the past,—the third Sabbath of April, 1865, with the third Sabbath of April, 1861. During the week preceding the last mentioned Sabbath, I had prepared a discourse for the morning on some evangelical topic, which had no direct reference to the imperilled condition of the country. But late on Friday evening the appalling news came that war had actually commenced in a vigorous and formidable attack on Fort Sumter. This intelligence threw the whole community into a paroxysm of surprise and horror; and so sure was I that you were too much excited to follow me in the train into which I had intended to lead you, that I thought I should only obey the intimations of Providence in endeavouring to fix your minds upon some of the lessons so impressively taught by that terrible crisis—and this conviction gave the complexion to my discourse. I was prepared to address you this morning on a subject of vital importance, especially to those whose minds are in some degree awake to their immortal interests; but when the paralyzing news of what had just occurred at Washington met my eye yesterday morning, I felt, as in the other case, that I should dishonour God's Providence if I were to attempt

to direct your thoughts in any other channel than that which had thus been opened to me. The startling events which have just occurred, must always stand out prominently in the history of the world; and though they will afford matter for solemn reflection and warning in all coming time, they can never come to us more impressively than now, while the nation's heart is writhing and bleeding in the most intense agony. Let us then reverently pause, and hear the voice of God, as it is speaking to us from amidst this scene of deep and all pervading darkness.

I. And the thought that presses upon us first, is nearly akin to one which I had occasion to introduce in connection with the funeral services of the last Sabbath morning—*How manifest is it that clouds and darkness are round about Jehovah's throne!* We readily assent to this truth, as not only clearly revealed in Scripture, but as having a continuous illustration in the economy of Divine Providence; but it is only in the presence of the greater events,—events that startle a nation or convulse the world,—events such as those with which our own nation is now in contact, that we gain any thing like an adequate impression of this truth. It has seemed to us a deep mystery that this land of ours, consecrated, as it has been, by our fathers' blood, and endeared by the most hallowed remembrances, should have become the theatre of desolating war; that madness should have so far reigned in the hearts of a portion of our countrymen as to lead them to grasp the sword, with a view to sever the bonds in which the providence of God had manifestly

united us ; that their malignant hostility should have been suffered to plunge the nation into this protracted scene of distress, and, I had almost said, to convert the whole land into a mighty grave yard. When we have looked out upon the passing horrors, and have looked forward to the uncertain dismal prospect, have not some of us sometimes well nigh felt a staggering of our faith, as if there were not an almighty and an all-gracious hand hid in the darkness? And not only has deep mystery pervaded the general course of events, but the mystery has seemed to culminate at particular points; and the most thoughtful and far-seeing have been baffled in their attempts at explanation.

But we had reached a point where light had begun to shine out of the darkness; victory had succeeded victory until the downfall of the rebellion had been virtually accomplished; in so much that the Chief Magistrate of our State had actually issued his proclamation, and it was understood that the President of the United States would speedily issue another, for a day of thanksgiving, in view of the brightening of our national prospects. But just at the moment when the nation is getting ready to bow herself in gratitude before her great Benefactor, the appalling fact comes upon us, like the lightning's flash, that a demon in human form has leveled successfully the instrument of death against the President, and another has attempted the same horrid experiment upon the Secretary of State, and his son and assistant, thus producing a complicated scene of murder, and opening a bloody path out of the highest places of human authority into the world un-

seen. In our grief and sorrow, we cannot help asking, wherefore it is that God is thus dealing with us; that the men who had been constituted the guides of the nation at this critical and perilous crisis, should thus, in a moment, be stricken down by the hand of a murderer, and the great interests with which they were intrusted possibly imperilled by the consequent change? We can only lay our hands upon our mouths, and adore the unsearchable depths of the Divine counsels, and reverently wait for the light from God's throne to illuminate them. Future years, future ages, will no doubt reveal an explanation of these events, which will increase the admiration of God's wisdom and goodness, both on earth and in Heaven.

II. In the events we are contemplating is mirrored forth, in a most impressive light, *the awful depravity of the human heart.*

Look at the case as involving simply the guilt of *murder*, — the premature and violent termination of human life, — and that in the face of a solemn prohibition from the author of life, with a denunciation of the most terrible judgment which a human being in this world is capable of suffering — even that which, in his madness, he ventures to inflict. He who commits murder, under any circumstances, inflicts an evil which it is impossible for him to repair — he breaks up the wonderful, complicated, mechanism that enters into our humanity — the tie which binds together what is material and what is spiritual in man he rashly sunders — all the relations which a being, sharing a common nature with himself, sustains, he terminates — and so, too, he puts an end to all the opportunities for doing

good, to all the means of spiritual culture, to every thing that enters into the idea of probation for eternity. Now, he who commits such a crime, apart from all the peculiar circumstances by which it is attended, is a monster; and he passes for nothing less, even in the estimation of those whose hands are as bloody as his own.

But mark the peculiar, complicated guilt by which *this* murder comes attended. In common with every other similar act, it has thrown a circle of relatives and friends into the deepest mourning; withdrawing from them one whose kindly and generous qualities had bound him to all of them in ties of affection, and to some of them in cords of conjugal and paternal love. But this is only the beginning of the sorrow which it has occasioned. The victim was a man whom a large majority of the nation had deemed worthy to be placed at its head; in whose wisdom and integrity they had full confidence; and under whose administration they expected shortly to welcome the return of an honourable and stable peace. They believed that he held in his hands, under God, the destinies of the nation; and they expected that he would live to be crowned with the whole nation's benedictions; and so implicit was the trust which they reposed in him, that they scarcely feared any adverse influences which the nation might have to encounter. It was at such a moment that that human fiend rushed forth, and, in the twinkling of an eye, laid the President into the arms of death. There was an air of desperate defiance in the manner of the act, as well as in the act itself, that showed a heart that had been steeped in the venom of hell. I do not know that the wretch

has been certainly identified yet, but it is safe to presume that he was a representative of those on whom rests the responsibility of having deluged this country with blood; nor is it uncharitable to add, that, though *his* hands actually performed the deed, yet it was probably the carrying out of an infernal plot, in which there had been an extended guilty participation. History does not record another murder which blends more of those qualities, in which are concentrated the malignant horrors of the world below.

And now, the thought which I wish to bring home to you, in living reality, is, that this fearful crime has been perpetrated by one who shares a common nature with you and me; and hence it is not unfair to infer from it the well-nigh unlimited susceptibilities of the human heart to evil. It is unsafe to presume that we are incapable of crimes which we have never committed; because the powerful temptation may not yet have had the opportunity to act upon our inward propensity to evil, and no one can tell but that it may come upon him with a force which his reason and conscience will be too feeble to resist. It is quite a supposable case that the time may have been when the wretch to whom we are referring would have shuddered as much as you or I would have done, at the thought of ever being chargeable with shedding human blood; and possibly this might have been his experience one year ago; but the fiend, though quiet, had a lodgment in his bosom, and it required only the action of circumstances to waken it into full energy. In every heart before me, yet unrenewed,

there lurks the same fiend; and you know not how soon he may bring you into an ignoble and fatal captivity. You may, indeed, never be tempted to the crime of murder, or to any thing that shall make you an outlaw from human society—and yet you can never know to what you *may* be tempted, so long as your heart is under the dominion of the spirit of evil. Wherefore I pray you to begin the conflict with this inward monster at once; and be not satisfied till you have effectually dethroned and banished him. If you wait but a little longer, the silken cord with which he has already bound you may turn into an iron chain; and you may soon awake to the conviction that you are bound by that chain for a whole eternity.

Oh that I could write this thought, as with the point of a diamond, on the hearts of all the beloved youth before me! Because you are not sensible of the vigorous workings of sin in your heart, and because both your reason and moral sense are revolted at those daring outrages that seem to set both God and man at defiance, you calmly repose in the conviction that sin has no dominion over you that can furnish reasonable ground for alarm. But herein, believe me, you are yielding to a most dangerous self-deception. You are really setting out in life in league with the grand adversary of your soul; for he is represented in that principle of evil in your heart; nay, it is through that principle that he stealthily operates to effect your ruin; wherefore I entreat you to summon all the powers of your soul, in humble dependence on God's grace, to a mighty effort for your deliverance from this inward usurper. Be not satisfied with any re-

formation, outward or inward, that does not involve that new creating process by which the soul loses its grovelling tendencies and becomes transformed into the Redeemer's image. And having once reached the point of possessing a regenerate nature, you have a right to expect that your journey through life will be cheered by the gracious and all sustaining presence of your Lord and Saviour, and will bring you at its close into the midst of the glory that surrounds his throne. With such appalling prospects on the one hand, and such glorious prospects on the other, will you not permit us to hope that your first and all engrossing object shall be to accept the offered salvation, and thereby plant yourselves on ground where you will be safe in any emergency.

III. Another obvious thought suggested by this dark outrage upon humanity, is that *man, at his best estate, has not an eye piercing enough to look far into the future.* One hour, one moment, before the President received the fatal charge, he saw nothing to indicate that he was not as secure as any of the multitude around him; nor was there one perhaps of all the lookers on, save the assassin who was pledged to the deed, and possibly some of his fiend associates, who dreamed that there was any murderous agency lurking there; but in an instant the deed that changed him into a corpse was done. Yesterday morning a large part of the nation was reposing gratefully in the thought that his mind was busily, honestly, generously at work in arranging the preliminaries of national peace; and some who had never favoured his administration before, thought they saw a

bright spot in it now; but, on opening the newspaper to see what the last twelve hours had brought forth, what should glare upon them, in almost frightful capitals, but the astounding intelligence that the President, under an infliction of human vengeance, was just closing his earthly career; and the next deliverance of the telegraph was that the assassin's triumph was complete. There may have been, doubtless there were, a herd of banditti, who were looking for the event with eager hope, and who welcomed it with malignant exultation; but no apprehension of it even was awakened in the nation at large, until its crushing weight assured us of its reality.

And herein we have represented to us another of the most striking features of our present condition—we never know on what ground the next step we take may place us—we cannot tell when pleasure will turn into pain; when hope will give place to disappointment; when life's day will come to a close amidst the night-clouds of death. And the same remark applies to nations as to individuals—that nation that we reckon most out of the range of vicissitude, and that seems to have in it all the elements of substantial prosperity and enduring growth, may be suddenly convulsed or riven by some internal or foreign influence, and other nations may be looking on, perhaps anxiously, perhaps indifferently, perhaps triumphantly, to see it perish. I do not mean that the future is entirely hid from us, and that we are left to grope our way into it without any light from without or from within; for Divine Revelation throws some of its beams forward upon our path; and then there is sufficient

uniformity in the operation of the general laws of Providence, to enable us to form an intelligent judgment, especially in respect to the more remote issues of things — still it remains true that the details of the future are unknown to us until they are revealed in actual experience. Both individuals and nations are liable to find a darkness that can be felt gathering around them, when, a little before, not a cloud had been seen to lower in their horizon.

And what is the great practical inference to be deduced from this characteristic feature of our present existence, but that we should always keep ourselves ready for tribulation, girded for conflict? If God, in his gracious sovereignty, is pleased to exempt us from severe suffering, and to fulfil the promise of any given period in respect to a happy future, well may we rejoice with thankfulness; but, if He sees best to dash our fond hopes, and cause us to walk where the darkness gathers and the tempest rages, still let us endeavour to maintain such an attitude that we can walk fearlessly, securely, triumphantly, even there. In other words, let us keep our hearts filled with the love of God; and then the future, no matter with what it may be charged, we can afford to welcome.

IV. *What a strange commingling of good and evil, of joy and sorrow, does human life present!* The President had just returned in safety from an expedition to the seat of war, including also a visit to the Rebel Capital. All his negotiations seem to have been, in the highest degree, satisfactory. He had returned with the full confidence that the blood of the nation would

soon stop flowing, and that the remaining years of his Presidency, though years of toil and anxiety, would still be years of comparative quietude. But there was not so much as the interval of a moment between this state of apparent security and joyful anticipation, and his becoming the subject of the heaviest earthly calamity which mortal man is capable of suffering. And then mark the sudden reverse to which the nation has been subjected. The fourth anniversary of the cold-blooded and barbarous attack on Sumter had come, and it was to be signalized—no doubt was signalized—by the restoration of the old flag to its legitimate place, and by the very hands from which it had been ignominiously and cruelly wrested. We all felt that it was a glorious day; and though we could not be present to join our voices in the jubilant strains that marked the ceremony, yet we were there in spirit, rejoicing that that cherished emblem of our country's liberty was raised from the dust and spread to the breeze, instead of the foul emblem of treason that had usurped its place. All over the land, wherever there were loyal hearts, there were joyous hearts—all felt a thrill of exultation at the thought that Righteousness had finally triumphed on the very spot where the first open onslaught upon the Union was made; and close by the spot whence the malignant decree, that we were no more one but twain, emanated. But in the closest possible contiguity to this general jubilee was an event that has not only caused the tide of joy to set back, but has opened a fountain of bitterness in the nation's great heart, and has

seemed to veil the very heavens over our heads in sackcloth. The nation went to sleep, amidst grateful associations, to dream of the pledges of better days, but awoke to have her heart set to bleeding by the fearful discovery that she was without a head.

Now does not this illustrate the mixture of joy and sorrow which forms so leading a characteristic of our probationary state? Is not the life of every individual, is not the history of every nation, an exemplification of this principle of the Divine government? And is not the reasonableness of this providential arrangement as apparent as the reality? Are not afflictions and mercies both necessary to the development of the best form of moral life, either individual or national? An unbroken course of calamity would depress and overwhelm the spirit, and destroy, in a great degree, the power of active exertion; whereas a uniform and long continued scene of prosperity would, with equal certainty, beget, in such hearts as ours, a spirit of pride, and self-confidence, and forgetfulness of our Supreme Benefactor. Is not then the actual arrangement of Divine Providence far better than any other that our poor wisdom could substitute for it? If it is our privilege to escape from trouble where we can, in consistency with a good conscience, is it not equally our duty to submit to it patiently and confidingly, where no legitimate way is open for our deliverance? If we are not called upon to thank God directly for our afflictions, surely we are bound to gratefully acknowledge his wisdom and goodness in that constitution of things in which afflictions and mercies are made to intermingle.

V. From the blood that has been shed there comes a voice *rebuking us for having put too much confidence in an arm of flesh, and charging us to trust the living God only.*

Are we not, upon a review of our national history during the last four years, forced to the conclusion that the war has been conducted, to a great extent, in the spirit of a practical atheism; that the Church has, in some degree, shared with the world in its idolatry of leaders and generals, and in its hard utterances and gloomy forebodings when they have been supposed to prove themselves incapable or unfaithful? If, in our prayers, we have recognized our need of Divine guidance and help, is there not reason to fear that in our habitual tone of thought and feeling we have been too much in sympathy with those who have been looking for great results to man rather than to God? Are there not certain names on the list of our military heroes with which, in our inmost hearts, we have identified our hopes of deliverance out of our trouble, far more than we have done with "the name of the Lord," which is our only "strong tower?" Have not a large portion of the people really believed and practically declared that, chiefly through the wisdom and integrity and patriotism of the nation's head, was the salvation of the country to be accomplished? But lo! what a rebuke has God, in his providence, been sending to us! One general after another, whose name we had already begun to enshrine for posterity, has passed into inactivity and comparative obscurity; and if mentioned at all on the historic page, it will be only in connection with some

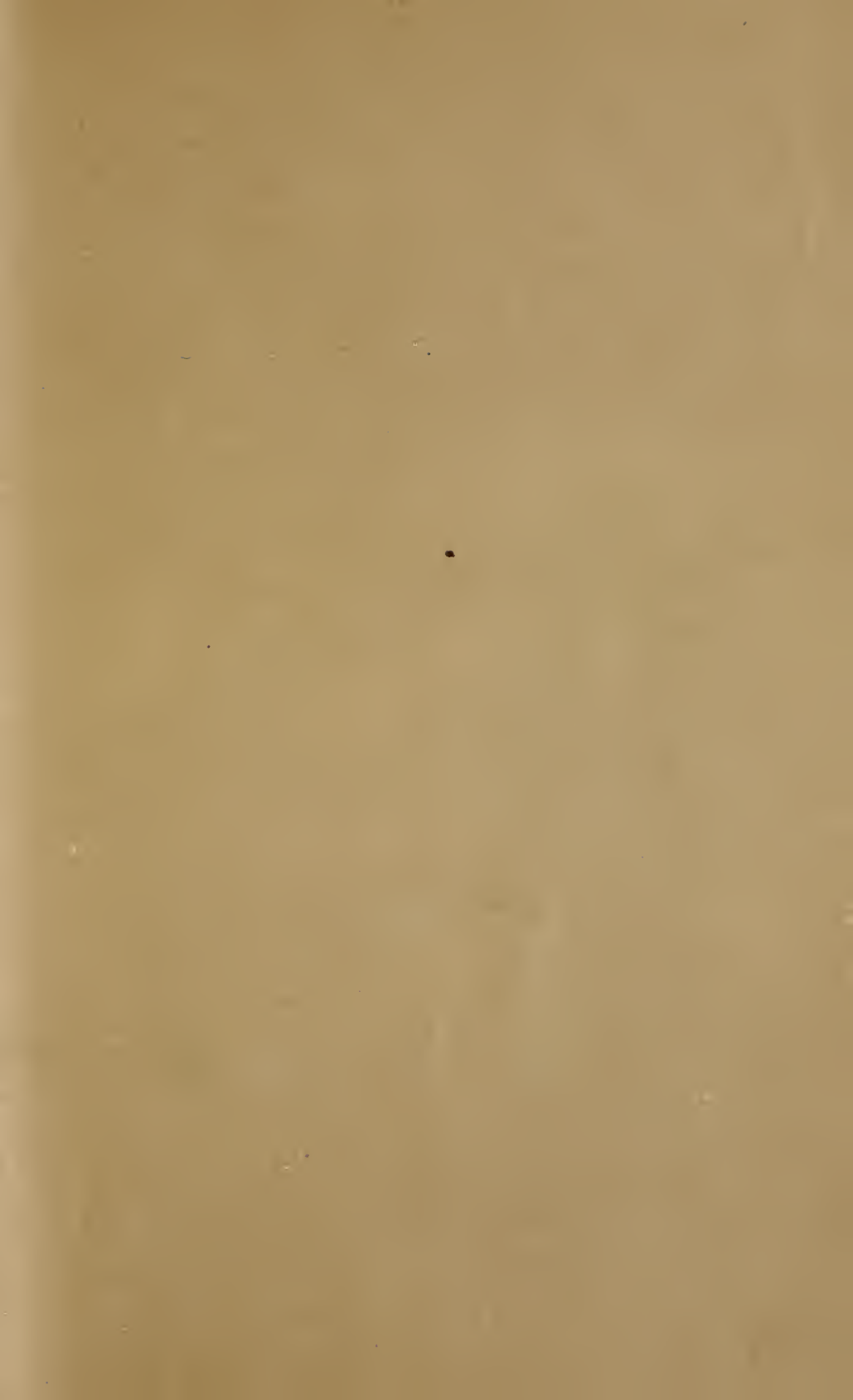
disastrous and mortifying failure, by means of which he had sunk into insignificance. And now, at the very moment when the arm of the President seemed strongest, death has palsied it — his friends were looking to him with unlimited confidence to carry the system of measures which he had inaugurated into full accomplishment in the restoration of peace ; but suddenly the appalling fact forced itself upon them that his last word had been spoken, his last earthly labour accomplished.

And what, think you, is the legitimate interpretation of these calamitous dispensations ? Is it that the Lord is not on our side, and that we are therefore to abandon our country's cause in despair ? Or is it that we may spare our own efforts in this terrible conflict, and leave the matter for infinite wisdom to bring to an issue, independently of any agency of ours ? Forbid it, Heaven forbid it, that we should thus misinterpret the dealings of God toward us. For have we not evidence already, bright as the sun at noonday, that the Lord *is* on our side — yes, on our side, in spite of all our forgetfulness of Him — else what means the recent succession of victories which have culminated in the surrender of the flower and strength of the Rebel Army ; in our possession of the Rebel Capitol ; and in the wandering off of the Rebel President as a miserable fugitive and vagabond in the earth, seeking to hide himself from the hand of retributive justice ? What meant those multiplied tokens of rejoicing and songs of triumph, which were greeting our eyes and our ears on every side, when the newspapers revealed to us the fact of our national bereavement ? I tell

you, my friends, we have no reason to despair of the Divine aid—on the contrary, there is every thing to inspire us with the hope that the work which God has begun in our behalf he will carry on to its full completion ; and hence, though the day which had been appointed for thanksgiving has been changed, by a proclamation from our Chief Magistrate, to a day of public mourning, yet surely the sorrows to which we give utterance at the throne of mercy, must be qualified by a spirit of devout thankfulness. Let us, then, in humble reliance on Divine counsel and aid, address ourselves to our duties as citizens, as patriots, as Christians, with a courage that never falters and a constancy that never wavers. Let us do our duty as faithfully as if we had no other dependence — let us trust God as implicitly as if, in ourselves, we were utterly powerless.

And from this standpoint sure I am that we need not be afraid to face the future. Even now, while the country is weeping beside the bier of her assassinated President, she may afford to lift her eye upward, and nerve herself for fresh action, in the confidence that she is destined to see a better day. What other signal calamities may await us, before the storm shall have subsided into a perfect calm, no human wisdom is adequate to divine — we can afford to leave that with the great Ruler of nations, and wait, in the faithful discharge of our duty, until God's appointed time for our deliverance shall come. The whole community — with the exception of those whom Humanity herself refuses to recognize — join in a hearty reprobation of the act that has so suddenly filled the land with

mourning; and may we not hope that this will be the signal for the abatement of party spirit, and the merging, in some degree, of political prejudices and animosities into a common desire for the security and the exaltation of our noble institutions. The best tribute we can render to the memory of our departed President, is to labour intelligently, vigorously, perseveringly, to carry out what we believe was his honest and earnest purpose — the preservation of the Union and the restoration of peace; and if we fail to do this, will not all our sorrowful utterances in view of his death, nay, will not the very mourning in which we have draped this place of our solemnities, bear testimony against us?



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